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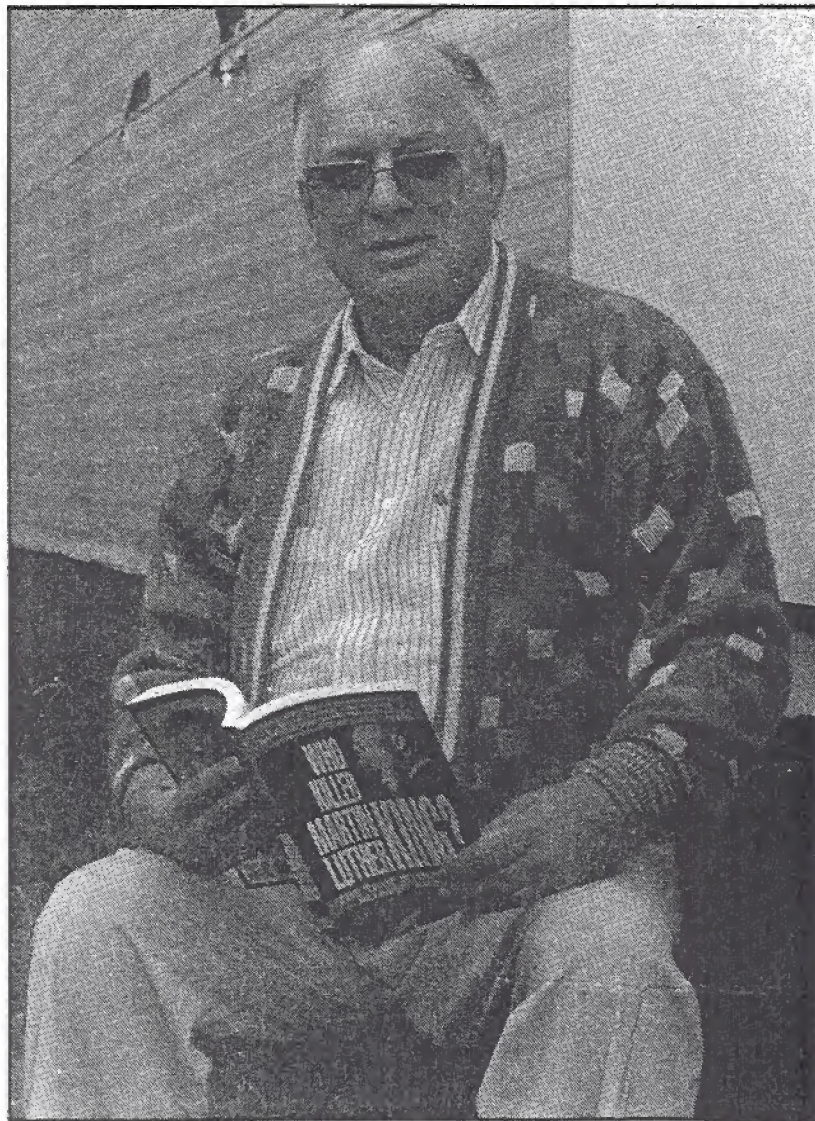
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Jerry Ray holds a book, "Who Killed Martin Luther King?", written by his brother, James Earl Ray. (Duane Sherrill photo)

Brother says Ray is innocent

By DUANE SHERRILL
Standard Staff

After serving more than 25 years behind bars for a crime he says he did not commit, James Earl Ray was denied early release on his 99-year sentence Wednesday by the Tennessee Board of Pardons.

Although he entered a guilty plea for the 1968 assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, the 66-year-old Ray has long attested his innocence, saying he was the victim of a conspiracy by

which he was set up as the fall guy. He has since called for a trial on the charge — a trial he never faced before because of his guilty plea.

If such a trial for the Martin Luther King assassination were to be ordered by the court, Ray's younger brother, Jerry Ray, feels his brother would be cleared of the crime.

Jerry, who moved to McMinnville in August and still resides locally, says he has been convinced of his brother's innocence since James Earl Ray was first arrested

for the crime. Like his brother, Jerry feels a conspiracy left James Earl Ray holding the bag. Jerry testified before the parole board on his brother's behalf Wednesday.

Jerry was one of three people who testified on James Earl Ray's behalf during the hearing. The other two men, Dr. James Lawson and Hosea Williams, were colleagues of King, and both now say a deeper investigation is needed to find if there was a conspiracy to murder the civil rights leader.

"Many of King's men are the ones who believe James is inno-

cent," Jerry said, pointing to the testimony provided by Lawson and Williams Wednesday.

However, blocking his brother's path to a trial on the charges are high-placed governmental officials who do not want to see such a trial take place, Jerry believes.

"It's all been politics since 1968," said Jerry. "If the politicians would leave the parole board alone, maybe they could come to a fair decision."

The parole board members who rejected Ray's parole had their
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minds made up about the outcome before the hearing happened, Jerry said.

"They already had prepared statements about why they were rejecting his parole request. They already had their minds made up when they came into the room," Jerry said.

"I told them if they released James, he could come live with me in McMinnville."

In sharp contrast to Jerry's beliefs, Shelby County District Attorney General John Pierotti vehemently opposed any current or future release for Ray during Wednesday's hearing, citing the devastation his crime had caused.

Following the reading of the decision, Ray told the parole board he did not wish to come up for parole again in 1999 as scheduled. His audible outburst was quieted by his defense attorney, William Pepper, who was by his side.

"It just isn't parole. James wants to clear his name. He's been in jail for over 25 years for a crime he did not commit," Jerry said. "Sure, he's got hopes of getting out some day, but most of all he wants to prove he didn't do it.

"Personally, I know he definitely didn't do it. He's done a lot of illegal things in his life, but he's not a violent person. As for politics, he just didn't care.

"Besides that, he had no experience with guns," Jerry added. "The man who killed Mr. King was an expert. There is no way he could have shot him from that distance with such accuracy."

Jerry, who visits his brother every Sunday at Riverbend State Prison in Nashville, subscribes to the idea of a governmental conspiracy in the King assassination.

"It's a coverup. They spent \$2 million to convict him and the pre-trial media coverage was so large they could not afford to lose," Jerry said.

"Just think what effect it would have if it were to come out that the government had a hand in King's death. That's the reason for the coverup. The government was concerned with King's movements."

Jerry believes he and his other brother, John, were targets of the conspiracy in the days leading up to James' guilty plea.

"His attorney at that time tried to convince me and John to talk to James and get him to plead guilty.

But, I didn't try to persuade him one way or another. I knew if I persuaded him to fight it that he might lose. If he lost in a trial he might have gotten the death penalty and I didn't want to be responsible for that," Jerry said.

James Earl Ray eventually pleaded guilty to the assassination, but in later years claimed he was tricked and coerced into the

plea.

The pressure to quiet James' attempt to get a trial for the assassination continued through the years, Jerry said.

In 1977, the day following James' trial on escape charges from Brushy Mountain State Prison, Jerry says he was approached with an offer of \$200,000 if James would publicly admit killing King. The offer was refused. He did not say who made the offer.

Again in 1978, Jerry says James was offered his freedom from jail if he would publicly admit his guilt in the King slaying. The offer was again refused.

Further allegations of James' guilt came from his wife, Sandy Ray, who he married while behind bars in 1977.

Mrs. Ray, from whom James is now divorced, publicly claimed James had admitted his guilt to her in a telephone conversation.

"That was an imaginary phone conversation, because she didn't have a phone. Plus, prisoner calls are monitored from the prison," Jerry said.

"She's made all kind of accusations. She's said I've threatened her with a gun and that James hired a hit man. None of them are true, she just likes the spotlight."

With James' parole attempt failed, Jerry says his hopes now lie in the possibility of a trial being granted because of new evidence.

One of the pieces of evidence Jerry spoke about was an alleged eyewitness who saw the shooter exit the room from where the fatal shot was fired.

Jerry maintains the eyewitness presented by the state, Charlie Stevens, who placed James' coming out of the room across from where Dr. King was killed, was paid off and was in fact drunk and asleep in his room when the shooting happened.

Instead, Jerry says the eyewitness was actually Stevens' common-law wife, Grace Walden, who saw the shooter exit the room.

However, Jerry said shortly after the shooting, Walden was whisked off to a mental asylum where she was kept for nearly 10 years.

"They didn't want her to testify because they knew she would clear my brother. Instead they had her taken off to an asylum so she couldn't testify," Jerry said.

In addition to possible testimony by Walden, Jerry hopes ballistic evidence will help clear his brother.

"We're laying our hopes that a trial will be granted in the next couple of months. They are bringing witnesses to Memphis right now, trying to build a case," Jerry said.